

### The future of opposition in Turkey: overcoming identity politics is the key for success

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# SWP Comment

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## The Future of Opposition in Turkey

Overcoming Identity Politics Is the Key for Success

Salim Çevik

Muharrem İnce was the presidential candidate of the Republican People's Party (CHP). The election results did not reflect the hopes İnce had created, and his ineptitude in managing the post-election process further undermined his popularity and credibility. However, İnce's inclusive appeals throughout the campaign suggest a potentially successful approach for opposition parties in general and the CHP in particular. To challenge President Erdoğan effectively, they need to mitigate the significance of identity politics.

When Erdoğan announced the snap elections in mid-April, few doubted he would win. Indeed, on 24 June Erdoğan received 52.59 percent of the vote. Having served as prime minister for 11 years, Erdoğan had first won the presidential elections in 2014 with nearly 52 percent of the vote, and last year's referendum also passed with almost 52 percent, transforming the parliamentary system into a presidential one. The results demonstrate a remarkable continuity of Erdoğan's voter base even though the vote share for his Justice and Development Party (AKP) fluctuated between 40 and 50 percent during the same period.

It is therefore possible to claim that 24 June was merely another round in a series of elections in which Erdoğan won by easily maintaining his power base due to the country's deep polarization. But during the electoral campaign period, the mood of the opposition electorate was different. It seemed for the first time that an alliance

of opposition parties, the National Alliance (Millet İttifakı), had a reasonable chance of winning, and Erdoğan was on the defensive. For the first time in sixteen years, the opposition's campaigns overshadowed Erdoğan's: they gathered larger crowds in rallies, set the political agenda and gained the upper hand in political debates. Muharrem İnce, rather than Erdoğan, was the star of the campaign process. Yet despite a worsening economy and unusually inept political campaigning, Erdoğan won in the first round. There are several lessons to be learned from this whole process.

### The Significance of Identity Politics

Commentators often claim that the binary approach of religious versus secular towards Turkish society and politics is superficial and misleading. Certainly, the country



is more complex than this binary picture suggests, yet the election results confirm that identity politics still dominate national politics. Thus, it is culture and identity rather than economy and policies that determine electoral choices. Erdoğan remains the main political figure in the country by safeguarding the support of the conservative/religious majority.

Given this context, the secular opposition mostly represented by CHP has two alternatives. The first involves challenging Erdoğan by supporting a political figure with a similar cultural and ideological background. This was tried in the 2014 election when Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, a conservative academic, ran as the combined candidate of the opposition parties CHP and MHP. Similarly, in this election there was a failed attempt to nominate former president Abdullah Gül as the joint opposition candidate. Election results validate the rationale behind the search for a rival conservative candidate.

Yet there is a second alternative involving a longer perspective and greater effort: undermining the importance and defining role of identity politics. Muharrem İnce pursued this strategy throughout his electioneering and thereby managed to dominate the campaign period. But it was evidently too little and too late. Since İnce's entire campaign lasted just fifty days, it might be wiser to not dismiss this strategy as a failure. This is easier said than done.

The key to İnce's success in dominating the campaign process lay in his ability to bring moderation to CHP's strict identity politics. While often defined as a party of the central left, CHP's policies throughout the last two decades were increasingly based on identity politics rather than social and economic issues. CHP was thus marked by its assertive secularism, which denied any religious visibility in the public realm, and nationalist policies that resisted attempts for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem. The minimizing of CHP's identity politics was apparent on both fronts, secular and nationalist, and they should be analyzed separately.

## Coming to Terms with a Conservative Majority

CHP has long objected to the public visibility of religion. By unquestioningly accepting the legacy of the secularizing reforms and policies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, and approving the repressive state policies on religion, CHP has estranged the conservative electorate.

This was most evident in the party's objection to the reforms enabling female university students and public-sector employees to wear headscarves. Given that the majority of Turkish women wear headscarves (several recent polls suggest around 60 percent of the adult female population), this staunch objection inevitably limited the party's power base and kept the party in opposition. However, Muharrem İnce took a radically different approach: he emphasized his religious upbringing, the religiosity of his immediate family, and his observance of Friday prayers; he unhesitatingly declared that wearing headscarves would be allowed in schools and public institutions if he got elected. He tried to allay the fears of the larger conservative public that CHP power would undermine recently won religious freedoms. This was a bold attempt to broaden the party's base to include conservatives. Although there had been several other attempts in this direction since Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu assumed the party chairmanship in 2010, İnce's stance was unequivocal. Even more significantly, this did not create a backlash within the party base, a fact which demonstrates that the general public reached a common-sense agreement regarding the wearing of headscarves in public institutions.

Furthermore, Millet İttifakı encompassed the Islamist Felicity Party (SP). The fact that CHP has formed an alliance with a party with even stronger religious credentials than AKP is significant, since in the past alliances with conservative figures or groups were always resisted by the secularist base of the party. This time, there was no opposition. Indeed, SP's election campaign

which, like CHP's, focused on socio-political problems rather than identity cleavages, thereby facilitating the party's acceptance by the CHP electorate. Although it did not result in electoral gains, SP's campaign received great sympathy from other members of the Millet İttifakı and signaled a shift towards undermining identity politics in favor of social policies. If SP maintains this stance, its impact in Turkish politics in the long run may be heavier than its own weight.

However, despite all the gestures regarding religious practices and freedoms, İnce's policy failed to make inroads on the AKP power base. While İnce's own personal history and family ties strengthened his claims of a more friendly secularism, his rigidly secularist political stance in the past undermined his credibility. Given CHP's decades-long policies and İnce's former record, his attempts during the fifty days of campaigning remained insufficient to reach across the political divide. Yet in the long term this remains the only viable strategy for CHP to become electable by the conservative public. Moreover, the presidential system and subsequent changes facilitating the formation of pre-election alliances force parties and leaders to move towards the center. Given that a presidential candidate needs 50 percent of the vote, it is clear that no one can challenge Erdoğan without appropriating his conservative constituency. This is mostly composed of lower-middle class and poorer segments of society, with a demographic that would typically lean towards the social policies of a leftist party. However, the social policies advocated by CHP in recent years remained under the shadow of identity-based polarization. Erdoğan is inevitably particularly intent on continuing the current state of polarization. Erdoğan made it clear as soon as he was re-elected that he has no intention of conciliation with his adversaries.

Given the current political system and social demographics, CHP has no alternative but to pursue its policy of ideological moderation on religious issues. The party program already states that secularism must be respectful towards religious beliefs

and practices. Yet this abstraction needs to be materialized vis-à-vis real-life policy preferences in order to appeal to the conservative electorate. This means a clear and sustained defense of religious freedoms extending beyond campaign periods. More significantly, such a policy has no significant cost for the party making it easier to maintain the strategy and discourse of the recent electoral campaign. However, the picture is quite different regarding the second identity-based cleavage in Turkey: the Kurdish question.

### **Moderation on the Kurdish Question**

Although even SP became part of the alliance forged by CHP, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the main Kurdish political party, was excluded. Despite the fact that HDP is a much more significant political actor compared to SP, it was forced to run alone since the opposition alliance could not risk losing Turkish nationalist voters.

Moreover, although İnce's discourse on the Kurdish question was undoubtedly more favorable regarding Kurdish political rights compared to the CHP's traditional position (which considered the problem primarily as a security issue), it still remained largely ambiguous and superficial. Compared to İnce's open and uncompromising moderation concerning the party's anti-religious stance, the lessening of the anti-Kurdish stance was still vague and unclear. İnce made several gestures such as visiting HDP's imprisoned presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş, but he also very consciously avoided getting involved with claims about government repression of the electoral process in Kurdish dominated regions. More significantly, although he was explicit on issues relating to religious freedom, he either made no comment or spoke deliberately ambiguously about the main demands of the Kurdish political movement, such as decentralization of the administration and the use of Kurdish language in the official realm and education. It

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seems that while the headscarf issue and the role of religion in public had been entirely exhausted by the electorate, debates regarding the Kurdish question are still ongoing. There may be a broad consensus that the previous denial and assimilation of Kurdish people was as undemocratic as the exclusionary politics directed against religion, but there is no clear consensus on how to remedy this mistake. Should the Kurds have more autonomous regions in line with the principle of self-rule? Should Kurdish be accepted as a national language and/or should it be allowed as a language of instruction? Should Kurds be considered as a distinct cultural group with no extra group-based political rights? These questions are still hotly contested. Therefore, while recognition of the Kurds is now agreed across a large spectrum of Turkish society, the specific political repercussions of this recognition remain largely unclear. We can thus deduce that there is still room for debate and also for political maneuvering in the Kurdish problem; it will likely continue to dominate Turkish politics for years to come.

One of Erdoğan's defining characteristics is his pragmatism, and over the years he has defended very different and sometimes opposing policies regarding the Kurdish question. However, the election results seem to give Erdoğan a free mandate to continue the hard-line nationalist policies he has pursued since 2015, and there appears to be little reason or incentive for another Kurdish opening. Moreover, the electoral alliance formed between AKP and the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the critical, dominant role that MHP will hold in parliament, will force AKP to further its current hard-line policies on the Kurdish question. As long as MHP does not overreach by trying to dictate its policies and preferences in too many areas, AKP will not pursue a policy of a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem. An additional issue complicating the Kurdish question is the

fact that it is now mired in the Syrian conflict. Available policy options will continue to be limited to security measures as long as the Kurdish PKK and its affiliates keep a strong presence in Northern Syria, across the Turkish border. Given all these constraints, it is highly likely that AKP will maintain a nationalist discourse and continue its hard-line policy concerning the Kurdish question for the foreseeable future.

## Challenges Ahead

How opposition parties can respond to the government's increasingly nationalist discourse, and the nationalist hysteria propagated by the largely government-controlled media, is a far-reaching challenge. While the centrist-nationalist Good Party (İYİ Parti) has no choice but to persist in its nationalist position and remain an alternative to MHP, the Kurdish question has the potential to poison any future alliances that opposition parties might build. For the foreseeable future, the Kurdish question will remain an inflammable issue that CHP will try to avoid at all costs. Ince or the future candidate of CHP will have to maintain a delicate balance between Turkish nationalism and a democratic approach to Kurdish politics, so as to gain the support of the nationalist/conservative constituencies, while not entirely antagonizing the political Kurdish movement. This, rather than the religious secular divide, is the Achilles Heel of CHP's attempts at shifting from identity-based policies towards those based on sociopolitical demands.

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